Angels Played Well until Tragic Ending

By Martin Felsenfeld

In their first 17 seasons in the American League, the highest the California Angels had ever finished was third. Their best record in club history to that time was 86-76, set in both 1962, the year the Angels were in first place on July 4th, and 1970.

And now in 1978, the Angels were prepared for what seemed to be their best season ever.

They got Lyman Bostock as a free agent from Minnesota. Don Aase, Chris Knapp, Brian Downing, and Dave Frost came to the team in off-season deals with Boston and Chicago, respectively. To get those last four players mentioned, the Angels had to sacrifice outfielder Bobby Bonds, who went to the White Sox and later to the Texas Rangers. The Angels even added players' names to the backs of their uniforms for the first time in the last several years. And Dave Garcia, rumored to be replaced by Minnesota's Gene Mauch after the 1977 season, would begin 1978 as manager.

So what happened to the Angels in 1978?

They opened the season by winning 14 of their first 21 games to set a new team record for most wins in the month of April. However, the club also had one of the worst batting averages in the league. Bostock, for example, hit only .147 in April, then publicly announced that he was donating his entire monthly salary to a local church for charity.

September 23rd, Bostock, visting Gary, Ind., as the Angels were in Chicago to play the White Sox, was suddenly shot to death in the back of a stranger's car.

The tragedy occurred, the Angels, already playing under a different cloud, saw their hopes of a first division title end right there, although it wasn't until a few days later that they were officially eliminated. But with an 87-75 record and a tie for second place, it was nevertheless the Angels' best finish in club history.

Garcia himself would be out of a job after just 46 games, with the Angels 25-21, even though they were only 1½ games out of first place. His fate was sealed when the Angels lost five in a row, including a three-game series to Chicago in which they were outscored 30-4. The third loss to the White Sox was by a score of 17-2.

Jim Fregosi, the former shortstop of the Angels, replaced Garcia as the club's new manager. The 36-year-old Fregosi was playing as a reserve infirlder for the Pittsburgh Pirates when he was informed about the Angels' managerial job opening.

Fregosi's first order of business as manager was to make Downing as his regular catcher. Under Garcia, Downing had shared the catching duties with Terry Humphrey. In the end, Downing finished with a .255 average, 7 homers and 46 runs batted in. Humphrey had managed only a batting average of .219, one homer and nine RBI's.

The team, after that woeful April start with the bats, recuperated to set club records in batting average (.259), and hit (1.417). Before his untimely death, Bostock led the Angels in hits with 168. It was the first time ever that any player had posthumously led the club in any positive category. He had also raised his batting average to .296.

Of the surviving players on the team, Don Baylor's 151 hits, 34 homers and 99 RBI's led the club in all three categories. Baylor, a former free agent, was voted the Angels' Most Valuable Player.

Pitching took a big step in 1978 as the Angels, for the first time since Fregosi was traded to the New York Mets for Nolan Ryan in 1972, put in a solid bullpen. Dave LaRoche racked up 25 saves and finished with a 10-9 record, and an ERA of 2.82. LaRoche was runner-up to New York's Rich Gossage for the Fireman of the Year Award. Since Fregosi's departure as an Angels' player, no other Angels' reliever had more than 10 saves; in fact, when LaRoche had his 25 saves in 1978, it was more than the entire team total in any year from 1972 to 1976.

But LaRoche, of course, had to make room for the starters, too. Ryan, although his record was only 10-13, pitched a one-hitter against Cleveland in May, and led the league in strikeouts with 260, for the sixth time in his seven seasons as an Angel. The only time Ryan didn't lead the league in strikeouts was 1975, which, ironically, belonged to his teammate, Frank Tanana.

Tanana finished 1978 with an 18-12 record, but arm problems kept him from a possible 20-win season. Tanana, at one point was 11-3, but he was 7-9 the rest of the way and finished with a 3.65 ERA, a career high.

Frost, after spending the first half in the minors, joined the Angels in June and finished with a 5-4 record in 11 games.

But a mid-season walkout by Knapp was one of many problems Fregosi had to face. Knapp finished at 14-8, but at one time, late July to be exact, he had a contract dispute and quit the team for three weeks.

Jose Rudi was hurt at the start of the season, playing only 12 of the team's first 41 games, but finished strong with 17 HR's and 79 RBI's. He was one of two Angels to hit a grand-slam homer as a pinch-hitter, the first time it had ever happened to them (Merv Rettenmund was the first).

Fellow free agent Bobby Grich, who had only 6 homers and 42 RBI's, slowly started to bounce back from disc surgery he had suffered in 1977. But Grich was preparing for the 1979 season by hitting .356 in September.

Rookie Carney Lansford, who began the season as a reserve infielder, replaced Dave Chalk at third base and led all A. L. rookie hitters with a .294 average. Chalk batted only .253 with one homer and 34 RBI's.

Fregosi finished his first season as a manager with a 62-54 record, and although the Angels didn't win the pennant (they were only five games behind Kansas City), he was hoping that 1979 would surely be different. That's because four months after the season ended, they obtained Rod Carew, the seven-time batting champion, in a trade with Minnesota.

And speaking of champions, that was the case with attendance at Anaheim Stadium. A record 1,755,386 fans showed up to see the local nine battle it out game after game--until the tragic ending.